INHERITING MT. TOM

by John Elder

The path up Mt. Tom starts from Prosper Road in West Woodstock. It climbs east around a little secondary summit, then veers south to touch the shore of a high pond called the Pogue. My walks through the woods of Vermont often trace the ruts of ancient logging trucks. But this one follows a broad carriage road, designed with great care near the close of last century. The Pogue itself was sculpted in the same era. Both landmarks are artifacts that continue to exist only because of regular maintenance—grading and graveling, dredging and reinforcement. They are features of a remarkable estate including barns, a greenhouse, a summerhouse, and the other outbuildings that radiate from a mansion holding a distinguished collection of nineteenth-century American art. No one would call this tract a wilderness.

COURTESY WOODSTOCK HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The path up Mt. Tom, circa 1880.

While far from the rugged grandeur we associate with Glacier, the Tetons, Yosemite, Yellowstone, and our other famous Western parks, the thoroughly cultivated landscape around Mt. Tom has nonetheless been designated as Vermont's first national park. Marsh-Billings National Historic Park was established by legislation that President Bush signed in 1992. Its name honors the early conservationist George Perkins Marsh, who was born on this same farm in 1801, and Frederick Billings, who pursued his own vision of stewardship here after he purchased the property in the last third of that century. The land eventually passed to Mary F. Rockefeller, the granddaughter of Billings, and her husband, Laurance Rockefeller. Having tried to follow the farming and forestry practices they inherited along with the estate in 1954, the Rockefellers are now bequeathing the property to the nation and will relinquish their tenancy within the coming year. The 555 acres of the estate itself will be managed in cooperation with the 88-acre Billings Farm and Museum, which remains in private ownership. A surrounding patchwork of protected lands includes a municipal park at the very summit of Mt. Tom (presented to the town of Woodstock by Mrs. Rockefeller's family in 1953) and the adjacent King Farm, owned by the Vermont Land Trust.

The new park's mission statement begins by saying that this will be "the first unit of the National Park System to focus on the history of American conservation and the evolving contribution of stewardship." The acknowledgment that environmental thinking and practices are evolving is apt, though not in the common sense of a smooth, steady progression. Biologists have now begun to characterize the process of natural selection as a "punctuated equilibrium." By this they mean that species may remain relatively stable for long periods, then adapt with startling speed when climatic or other environmental changes so dictate. I believe that our conservation movement is now entering such a period of rapid change.

Discussion swirls around the idea of wilderness that has dominated American environmentalism since John Muir founded the Sierra Club in 1892—exactly one century before the establishment of Marsh-Billings Park. I do not see such reevaluation as rejection of the wilderness ethic, but hope instead that we will now find new ways to integrate our vision of wilderness into a more socially inclusive perspective on the environment. In the realm of culture, as in that of biology, evolution is a continuous, genetic unfolding, rather than an abrupt substitution of one model

for another. Such organic transformation is accelerated by dramatic shifts of outward circumstance, and the striking reversals within Vermont's environmental history make our state a particularly good one in which to discern the broader changes in conservation. One place to focus will be the lineage of stewardship that Marsh-Billings represents and which, with this new park, we all inherit. Inheritance is a familial mode of relationship. It is an active process rather than a commodity to be received—an imaginative connection, conceived in history, with those who went before and those who will come after .

From 1791 through the War of 1812, Vermont was the fastest growing state in the Union. Woods were cut

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The Pogue. Marsh-Billings Park became part of the National Park System in 1992.

down with a swiftness that had less to do with farmers' need to clear fields than with their desire to produce the charcoal and potash that brought them valuable cash-supplements. Flocks of merino sheep were then pastured across Vermont in a boom lasting for just a couple of decades and sometimes referred to as "merino-madness." Zadock Thompson, in his 1854 natural history of Vermont, depicted a wasteland of ravaged slopes in which white-tailed deer and beaver were essentially extinct, along with moose and all the larger predators.

Growing up in Woodstock at a time when Mt. Tom was effectively denuded, George Perkins Marsh saw the mud run through the streets of town after heavy rains and watched the profile of the mountain erode from year to year. He remembered these effects years later when serving as the United States Minister to Turkey and Italy, and drew a connection to the damaged productivity of soil in ancient nations around the Mediterranean. His 1864 book *Man and Nature, or Physical Geography as Modified by Human Action* was one of the first to assert that deforestation caused environmental damage on a massive scale.

> The face of the earth is no longer a sponge, but a dust heap, and the floods which the waters of the sky pour over it hurry swiftly along its slopes, carrying in suspension vast quantities of earthy particles which increase the abrading power and mechanical force of the current.... The washing of the soil from the mountains leaves bare ridges of sterile rock, and the rich organic mould which covered them, now swept down into the dank low grounds, promotes a luxuriance of aquatic vegetation that breeds fever, and more insidious forms of mortal disease, by it decay, and thus the earth is rendered no longer fit for the habitation of man.

Marsh's writing contributed directly to the founding of the Adirondack Park and of Yellowstone National Park, as places where further deforestation would be prevented. Its enormous influence led Lewis Mumford to call *Man and Nature* "the fountainhead of the conservation movement." But as the book's title reflects, this was a more human-oriented vision than has generally prevailed within the environmental movement in our own century. Marsh emphasized the need for human action to restore the environmental balance on which human society depends. David Lowenthal, his biographer and the editor of a modern edition of *Man and Nature*, has characterized Marsh's attitude in this way: "If man could ruin nature, he might also mend it." In the early conservationist's own terms, "man" must now "become a co-worker with nature.... He must aid her in reclothing the mountain slopes with forests and vegetable mould...." The founding of our state's first national park reinforces Marsh's language by localizing it. The park announces, in effect, that Vermont has a word of its own to say, one that will complement the Western voices in America's environmental discourse. The stories of this long-settled landscape may help us to imagine a more inclusive paradigm for American conservation. In the syntax of these mountains, "loss" and "recovery," "wilderness" and "stewardship" may all be spoken, and connected.

We always enter the story of a place through the narrative of our individual lives. I have to say it feels as if I have been on my way to Mt. Tom for almost thirty years, and as if this personal passage has tracked along with the evolution of environmental thinking in America over the same period. I grew up in northern California, nurtured in the bosom of the Sierra Club. When I graduated from college in 1969, the civil-rights movement, the anti-Vietnam War movement, the women's movement, and the wilderness movement all felt like elements of one sublime and liberating vision. For many young people of my generation, the grandeur of the Sierra Nevada was the fitting backdrop of this cultural drama.

Coming east to attend graduate school seemed in some ways a falling off—as a departure from the Western mountains that seemed to ratify all of these visionary movements, as well perhaps as a turning toward a professional landscape from the terrain of adventure and youth. I still remember my first hike in the Connecticut woods, and how put off I was by the leaf litter and underbrush. The ground seemed

so messy after the cathedral floor of Muir Woods near my Mill Valley home. The landforms also felt too close together to allow a clear look at the horizon. A fellow grad student from the West remarked that being in New England was like living in a teacup. I thought, "Exactly! A teacup, and all those leaves around my boots are the dregs."

Over the intervening years, however, I've come to love these Eastern woods and to claim them as my familial landscape. "They must go down," Robert Frost writes of the leaves in his hardwood groves, and so they must. First blotched and perforated, then reduced to skeletons, then rolled into a fine moist meal, they sift downward through the strata over four seasons before arriving at their destination in the sweet, black soil. Vermont may not offer the West's magnificent expanse of sky. But my vision has been drawn downward to what soil-scientists call the O-Horizon. This is the layer of decomposing organic material, containing so much of a forest's nutrients that the largest trees send fine root filaments *up* to interweave in a mat just below the top two inches of the forest floor.

The way the seasons here are always being processed underfoot has helped me to identify more closely with these Green Mountains, where the members of our own family have found ourselves, where we lead our lives together and where, in time, we will lose them, one by one. Perhaps this is always the way it goes, with homeground as an inheritance that we receive and into which we then have an opportunity to enter more deeply. The poem Frost recited at the inauguration of John F. Kennedy began, "The land was ours before we were the land's." With the wind ruffling his white hair and making it impossible for him to read his typescript, the poet of Vermont looked inward and spoke on. He intoned, "Something we were withholding made us weak/Until we found out that it was ourselves/We were withholding from our land of living...."

George Perkins Marsh and Frederick Billings, fathers of Vermont's first national park.

We must conceive of stewardship not simply as one individual's practice, but rather as the mutual and intimate relationship, extending across the generations, between a human community and its place on earth. We must recognize that, like the bonds of family, stewardship grows from error, misapprehension, repentance, forgiveness, and hope, and cannot simply be the implementation of a policy or master plan. Insofar as a balance between humanity and nature has emerged in Vermont, it is the product of a tragically exploitive history and a providential recovery. Such a landscape offers its own ironic, yet hopeful perspective to the environmental discourse of our day.

Our language about wilderness has often been associated with an impulse toward transcendence—an escape from our lives' dailiness through climbing remote mountains that bear us to the sky. When environmental historians like William Cronon ask us to rethink the notion of wilderness, they point to complex and dynamic patterns of land use that have not generally been recognized by wilderness legislation. The most fundamental way to call this question is to ask what human history has to do with natural history. The wilderness ethic has emphasized the need to restrict human activity, in order to protect natural areas that are, in the words of the 1964 Wilderness Act, "vast," "untrammeled," and "pristine." This philosophy was a vital advance over narrowly extractive or utilitarian approaches to nature. It represents one of America's enduring contributions to human culture. An awareness has also grown up in the environmental community over the past two decades or so, however, that more direct connections must now be drawn between wilderness and urban America, between environmental preservation and values of social justice. What, we begin to ask ourselves, is the deeper connection between the Gates of the Arctic National Park in Alaska and inner-city Philadelphia?

In attempting to answer this question, we must come back to the idea of stewardship addressed in the new park's mission statement. Vermont might seem at first an unlikely landscape within which to pursue a more inclusive environmental vision. Because of its refreshing contrast to the more urban areas surrounding it, the state is often perceived as a sort of pleasant green blur. It can seem a pastoral vestige, a part of the Northeast that has been spared the congestion and pollution of the Boston-to-Washington corridor. I once saw a t-shirt in Middlebury's Ben Franklin department store on which was printed VERMONT IS THE WAY AMERICA USED TO BE. But our state's mystique, while appealing, is ultimately less nourishing than its true history—of early industry and deforestation followed by a dramatic return of the forests. One hundred and fifty years ago, Vermont was sixty-five percent cleared, while today over eighty-five percent of our land is once again wooded. In many cases, the reforestation has been an unplanned effect of agricultural abandonment. At Marsh-Billings it has been the result of a policy in which forestry, agriculture, and social health were pursued over decades as coordinated and consistent goals.

Frost recognizes both the attraction and the limitations of pastoral nostalgia in the second line of his poem

"Directive," with its sardonic reference to "a time made simple by the loss/Of detail...." Nostalgia can be a form of sentimentality—a mental condition memorably defined as loving something more than God does. Paying attention to the details is important because it prevents such disproportion. Remembering the particular story of a particular place on earth bequeaths a future with creative choices. Stewardship is the story of faithfulness and practicality that can be read along the carriage road to Mt. Tom.

It is the story of Frederick Billings, who owned this estate in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Billings, who had lived in Woodstock as a boy but made his fortune in the West, purchased this property in 1869. Five years earlier he had read *Man and Nature.* This book was to have a lifelong impact on Billings, and made especially significant the fact that the farm he had just purchased was also that on which Marsh was born in 1801. While living in California, Billings often visited Yosemite and became an advocate of preserving the stupendous geology and redwood groves of that region. But reading Marsh's book also convinced him of the importance of stewardship that would preserve the common, working landscapes on which our collective human welfare depended.

Until his death in 1890, Frederick Billings worked to become such an efficient co-worker. He wanted his estate to provide a demonstration of the most up-to-date and scientific approach to farming and forestry. In developing both his herd of Jersey cows and his forest park, he was motivated by values that we associate today with the term "sustainability." He believed that, in contrast to the erosive methods of early Vermont agriculture, he could show a long-term profit while also managing a farm and a forest that grew more productive and valuable with each new year. His social purpose was equally ambitious. The carriage road winding past the Pogue was one of his proudest achievements. It related to Billings's goal of elevating his local community through exposing his neighbors to a beautiful and productive working landscape. The *Vermont Standard* of September 1, 1887 reported that

> Mr. Billings' drive to the summit of Mt. Tom is nearly completed, and is a surprise to everybody by reason of its easy grade. From the point where it leaves the "Pogue Hole" road, in the field a little way above the woods, to the summit a team may trot every rod, and a portion of the way one passing over it seems almost suspended in air. The outlook is grand. The road is so broad that teams may pass each other at any point and it is to be graveled and made first-class. Only think what an attraction this is to be to Woodstock! Though a private enterprise, the public are permitted to enjoy it freely.

The denuded forests around Woodstock (here, circa 1869) influenced both Marsh and Billings's ideas about the environment.

The landscape historian Mark Madison has discussed Frederick Billings's desire to combine efficiency, scientific progress, and moral uplift in the design of his farm. The carriage roads, in particular, served the last of these values: "As the wealthiest and most prominent citizen of the village of Woodstock, it was only natural for Billings to seek to improve his own surroundings and those of his neighbors, through example and accessibility to improving vistas."

One challenging dimension of the Marsh-Billings legacy is its obvious connection with wealth and privilege. For me, though, this is also one of the new national park's advantages. It makes overt and inescapable an issue always inherent to American conservation whether we want to recognize it or not. Private wealth has played a crucial role in the formation of many of our most celebrated parks. Beyond the connections of particular parks with such fortunes, many other aspects of political power and social privilege have been intertwined with our National Park System from the day of the Harrimans and Stanfords to the present. Congressman Phil Burton's remarkable Omnibus Bill of 1978, authorizing new parks, expanding allocations for land acquisition, and promoting new wilderness areas within existing parks, was described by its critics as "Park Barrel." I celebrate what this legislation accomplished, but feel that the derogatory phrase also pointed out the inescapable connection of enormous conservation projects with patronage and electoral strategy. A political issue of a different sort is that visitors to the parks, like the memberships of major environmental organizations, still show far less economic or racial diversity than America at large. When our family took the ritual tour of Western parks several years ago, we were struck by how few people of color were represented among our fellow visitors.

In contemplating the privileged origins and limited clientele of many national parks, I think about Middlebury College where I have been on the faculty for almost twenty-four years. Such richly endowed, liberal-arts institutions are like the parks in being founded and sustained by private wealth, as well as patronized by a significant percentage of students whose parents can readily afford the current $30,000 tariff. Such facts might lead one who is inclined to discount the parks because of their elite associations also to reject the colleges' legitimacy. But I want to argue against both of these possible rejections. For one thing, I feel personally grateful to the Rockefellers for the gift of Marsh-

and agriculture, wilderness and human settlements, may all be affirmed within our vision of stewardship. I believe that the contradiction some perceive between wilderness and environmental justice is really an inability to achieve a broad enough perspective. In Seamus Heaney's recent volume of selections from Wordsworth's poetry, he includes a couple of suggestive extracts from that poet's *Alfoxden Notebooks* that address this need to widen our view:

> Why is it we feel
> So little for each other, but for this,
> That we with nature have no sympathy,
> Or with such things as have no power to hold
> Articulate language?
> ...
> And never for each other shall we feel
> As we may feel, till we have sympathy
> With nature in her forms inanimate,
> With objects such as have no power to hold
> Articulate language. In all forms of things
> There is a mind.

I treasure the tentativeness of these two verse-entries, in which Wordsworth tries to express an idea which we are still working to formulate today.

The value of stewardship and the desire to take issues of environmental justice into account absolutely do not lessen the value of wilderness. On the contrary. There is no one I admire more than Terry Tempest Williams, fighting for her southern Utah wilderness, or Rick Bass, standing up for his northern range of the Rockies. Efforts like theirs are

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The historic carriage road cleared by Billings in the 1880s.

neither replaced nor discounted by the search for a wider environmental paradigm. When growing out of fidelity to particular, diverse communities of life, the preservation of wilderness becomes a concrete commitment rather than an abstract value. To the extent to which such a commitment is inclusive and participatory, it can also help us take our cities more fully into account, broaden the constituency of the environmental movement beyond its largely white base, and affirm the distinctive cultures supported by agriculture and forestry.

The word Vermont has to say within the current national dialogue about nature and culture comes from a history in which the environmental quality and balance of a long-settled state have improved dramatically over the past century and in which people have testified by their writing and their actions alike about the desirability of such balance. Nora Mitchell, director of the Olmsted Center for Landscape Preservation, has pointed out the similarity between the words *conservation* and *conversation*. In Vermont there has been an illuminating conversation in which the forests and the farms have both held the floor at different stages. It's been like a long story with many twists and turns. In her essay "Landscape, History, and the Pueblo Imagination," Leslie Marmon Silko has written about the inclusive Pueblo vision of the world in which "Everything became a story."

> A dinner-table conversation, recalling a deer hunt forty years ago when the largest mule deer ever was taken, inevitably stimulates similar memories in listeners. But hunting stories were not merely after-dinner entertainment. These accounts contained information of critical importance about behavior and migration patterns of mule deer. Hunting stories carefully described key landmarks and locations of fresh water. Thus a deer-hunt story might also serve as a "map." Lost travelers, and lost piñon-nut gatherers, have been saved by sighting a rock formation they recognize only because they once heard a hunting story describing this rock formation.

The Marsh-Billings Park represents a story, too, and a map. It suggests how, over the generations, soil may be enriched and forests preserved. It shows that the example of discerning stewardship may be a gift as valuable in its own way as the balanced, healthy landscape that it perpetuates.

While my first hike into the new park was in late October, my most recent visit was in an early December snow squall. Though the air was thick and white, only a few inches had accumulated on the ground as I began, so that I could trudge in without snowshoes or skis. Majestic Norway spruces, darkly spired, arose momentarily in rifts amid the swirling snow then, as suddenly, were gone. The snow continued to thicken, though, so that even those intermittent landmarks disappeared, and my footing became tricky on the steeper grades. When I reached the Pogue, I hunkered down beside it to watch the flakes colliding with the water and melting into a cloudy O-Horizon just below the fat black surface. Then I turned back toward Prosper Road and my car. A clearer afternoon would come, when I would once again follow the carriage road all the way to the summit. In the meantime, I had also enjoyed this day's beautifully broken hike, with its reminder that the story of Mt. Tom, too, is nowhere near the end. ●